OPINION

BY MARIA AHMAD

Afterlife of disaster

FIFTEEN years after the Airblue ED 202 plane crash that killed all 152 people on board, an appellate court in Islamabad has awarded Rs5.4 billion in compensation to the families of eight victims. This is unlikely to be the end of the matter. The case will move through further stages of appeal, and the money may not arrive anytime soon. That part is familiar. What is easier to miss is the quieter truth beneath it, that these families are still carrying a national tragedy through the legal system long after the rest of the country has moved on.

The dead do not file claims. The living do. The living learn dates and numbers they never asked to know. They learn how to speak about the thing that happened to them in the language of tort — accident, negligence, vicarious liability — because institutions require a vocabulary before they offer attention.

For the law to engage at all, grief has to be translated into loss. Grief is not the same as loss. Grief is lived. Loss is legible — set out in documents, files and defined heads of damages. Joan Didion wrote of grief as resistant to sequence or sense. Law insists on both.

A plane crash does not need interpretation but the law requires it to be categorised. The crash has to be placed within the terms of international conventions and liability regimes so that legal responsibility can be argued and assessed. Once grief enters this legal order, it takes on a different form. The grieving family adopts new roles and descriptions: plaintiffs, respondents, applicants, legal heirs, dependants. Lived time does not move in the same register as legal time, which advances in adjournments and orders, while grief remains where it is.

There is nothing exceptional about this. From the Pan Am Flight 103 crash in Scotland to Malaysian Airlines MH17 in Ukraine, families affected by aviation disasters in history have described the same afterlife of catastrophe: years spent repeating the same facts, the same narrative, keeping loss institutionally intelligible, even after public urgency has passed.

In the constitutive accounts of law associated with American sociologists Patricia Ewick and Susan Silbey, legality does not operate only at the level of courts and statutes. It is made and remade by the ordinary actions of ordinary people, whose lives are reshaped as they move through legal processes. In other words, when people turn to law, they do not simply use it. They supply it with what it needs to function, and are adjusted by that process in turn.

If, as legal sociologists suggest, it is out of the most ordinary acts that law is produced, then grief does not merely encounter the legal system. It helps sustain it. Each filing, appearance, and statement of loss performs the work through which legality reproduces itself in the aftermath of tragedy. That work is not abstract. Courts rely on earlier accounts of loss to decide what care was owed, how responsibility should be fixed, and what compensation is appropriate. A 1991 US supreme court judgement on damages for mental distress for passengers following a near-crash is still referenced in aviation litigation. A damages claim following the PIA flight PK 668 crash in Multan in 2006 sits behind the Airblue judgements.

These tragic histories are rarely recalled in full. In legal argument, whole catastrophes are reduced to a single name. 'Lockerbie' is no longer just a place in Scotland, but shorthand standing in for years of loss. This does more than just preserve loss. Reduced this way, loss is able to travel — across cases, places, and time — and to set, in advance, the terms on which later loss will have to be presented in order to be institutionally recognised. That is how grieving persons turn to the law already knowing what will be demanded of them and what kinds of suffering can be compared. What was extracted from grief remains in circulation as loss, available for public use, detached from the people who first bore the cost of making their suffering usable.

> The dead do not file claims. The living do.

None of this imputes villainy. Nor is it novel. It's a structural requirement of a common law system that depends on continuity, precedent, reasoned justification. Legal systems account carefully for outcomes. They are less attentive to what it takes to sustain participation. Loss has to remain available for the law to continue, but the burden of keeping it so leaves little trace in the record. That is why the recent Airblue judgments should land with force, even if they are headed into further rounds of appeal. Not because anything finally settles after all these years, but because the demands placed on the grieving may now, perhaps, begin to recede. Keeping one's grief permanently available to the system is not a civic function anyone should have to bear. ■

The writer is a lawyer based in Karachi. The views expressed are her own.

BY NASIRA HABIB

Forgotten women

SEVENTY-SEVEN per cent of Pakistan's more than 11 million farms are smaller than five acres, yet the country's agricultural policies rarely reflect this reality. They fail to recognise that the survival of these farms depends heavily on women's labour and ecological knowledge. Despite their central role, women remain largely invisible in agricultural policy, planning, and data.

Across Pakistan's agroecological zones — in Punjab's plains, Sindh's deserts, and the mountain valleys of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Balochistan and Gilgit-Baltistan — women's knowledge of soils, seeds, plants and seasonal rhythms has been refined over generations. They traditionally managed organic materials in ways that maintained soil fertility. They selected diverse crop varieties, preserving traits for soil types, water availability, taste, cookability, and resilience. These processes yielded thousands of seed varieties emerging from local ecosystems. They developed an intimate and holistic understanding of their local ecosystems, soil and plant health, and plant properties, including medicinal uses. Grandma's remedies still come in handy to heal our minds and bodies.

Women also sustained livestock, which is a central pillar of food sovereignty. They fed and watered cattle, buffaloes, goats, sheep and poultry; collected fodder and grasses; milked animals; made yoghurt, *lassi*, cheese, butter and ghee; and applied traditional remedies for common illnesses. Their labour formed the bedrock of mixed crop-livestock systems, which nourished rural families and stabilised incomes.

But the Green Revolution of the 1960s and 1970s dismissed the critical role of women. Their composting, nutrient-recycling and carbon-sequestering systems were abandoned in favour of synthetic fertilisers that initially boosted yields but eventually depleted soil organic matter and disrupted microbial life. Their seed-saving skills were replaced by commercial seeds that had to be purchased each season.

Chemical inputs, including pesticides, replaced the centuries-old wisdom that had emerged from peaceful coexistence with nature. Their management of diverse cropping systems was undermined by monocultures. The ecological balance that women maintained — through mixed cropping, organic recycling, and careful water use — was pushed aside.

Despite their central role in sustaining small farms, rural women are too often reduced to unpaid labourers with ever-increasing workloads but no rights and no voice. They work longer hours than men, perform the most physically demanding tasks, and yet hold little to no decision-making authority over land, income or farm planning.

Today, Pakistan's farms bear the consequences: declining soil fertility, widespread micronutrient deficiency, pesticide contamination, water depletion and a dangerous dependence on costly external inputs.

Food insecurity is rising even as production systems grow more fragile. The promise of the Green Revolution has given way to a landscape of ecological degradation and economic vulnerability. As climate change intensifies, as floods, droughts, and heatwaves become more frequent and as male out-migration increases, women's responsibilities have grown heavier — while their rights remain unchanged.

Reversing this damage requires returning to the principles that women have long embodied: recycling organic matter, protecting genetic resources and biodiversity, and working with — and not against — ecological processes.

> Women's daily decisions shape the fertility of our soils.

Agroecology does not replace traditional knowledge — it builds upon it. It gives a scientific and policy language to what women have practised for generations. It strengthens soil health, restores biodiversity, eliminates chemical dependence, and enhances climate resilience.

Pakistan's agricultural future depends on recognising rural women not merely as workers but also as farmers, ecological stewards, innovators and leaders. Their daily decisions shape the fertility of our soils, the biodiversity of our fields, the health of our livestock and the nutrition of our families.

Women have sustained smallholder agriculture for generations. The time has come for our policies, institutions, and national imagination to place them at the centre — and to learn from the ecological wisdom they have safeguarded for centuries.

Empowering women is not an act of social benevolence; it is a practical necessity for environmental regeneration and food sovereignty. ■

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FROM THE PAST PAGES OF DAWN

1976 | Fifty years ago

Chou En-lai passes away

PEKING: Chou En-lai, scholar and revolutionary, who became a founding father of modern China, died of cancer in Peking … it was announced here today [Jan 8]. He was 78. Death came at 9.47 a.m. local time … to the man who stood close to power in the People's Republic for a quarter of a century. He served as the supreme tactician of a revolution which transformed the lives of some 750 million people in the world's most populous nation. Through turmoil and purge, Mr Chou stood resolutely at the side of Chairman Mao Tsetung. Mr Chou was credited as mastermind of China's foreign policy ever since the People's Republic was founded… . He was Prime Minister from the start and Foreign Minister until 1958. — News agencies

[Meanwhile, according to news agencies from Washington,] U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger said today [Jan 8] he did not expect the death of Chinese Premier Chou En-lai to change the current world balance of power. "I always liked Chou personally," Dr. Kissinger told reporters shortly after word was received of Mr. Chou's death. But he declined to give a more formal statement.

1951 | Seventy-five years ago

Nepal king

NEW DELHI: Nepalese Prime Minister Shar her Jung Bahadur Rana announced in Kathmandu today [Jan 8] that King Tribhuvan would continue to be King of Nepal, reports the [Press Trust of India]. He also announced the decision to summon a constituent assembly not later than 1952 and the setting up of an interim Cabinet of 14, with the least possible delay. Seven of these Ministers will be representatives of the people.

Full amnesty to political prisoners was also announced by the Prime Minister. The Prime Minister's declaration which runs into seven typed pages, said that in case King Tribhuvan decided not to return to Kathmandu immediately, it is open to him to appoint a Regent during his absence.

It is understood from official quarters in Delhi that the terms of the declaration made by the Prime Minister of Nepal are in substantial agreement with the advice tendered by the Government of Bharat in a memorandum ... to the Government of Nepal. In their memorandum the Government … had stressed the need for the return of King Tribhuvan … to [Kathmandu] and had said that this was essential for the peace and stability of Nepal and also for the smooth working of the constitutional reforms in Nepal. — News agencies

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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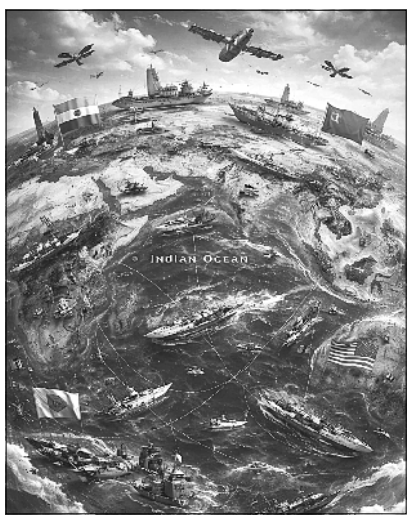
Shifting dynamics reshaping security



IN the vast expanse of the Indian Ocean, where ancient trade winds once carried spices and silk, a modern geopolitical chessboard is unfolding. Dubbed the 'new great game', this rivalry echoes the 19th-century Anglo-Russian contest for Central Asia, but now pits the United States, China and India in a high-stakes struggle for maritime dominance.

For Pakistan, straddling the ocean's northwestern rim, these shifting sands are not abstract; they directly imperil its sovereignty, economy and military posture. As Beijing fortifies its foothold through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), Washington bolsters New Delhi's naval ambitions, and tensions simmer post-May Pakistan-India conflict, Islamabad faces a precarious balancing act amid escalating threats.

The Indian Ocean is not a peripheral theatre; it is the world's economic lifeline. Over 80 per cent of global seaborne oil transits its waters, alongside trillions in annual trade. Regional tensions add to the complexity of the matter.

CPEC's $62 billion infusion promises economic revival for Pakistan. Yet, vulnerabilities abound. India's alliance with the US, Japan and Australia equips New Delhi with surveillance software and facilitates the bid for undersea dominance. US arms sales to India have surged, slashing Moscow's share from 80pc to 38pc since 2010, signalling a realignment that sidelines Pakistan.

Security-wise, Pakistan confronts a two-front nightmare. The recent clash intensified the security dilemma, igniting an arms race. Islamabad's defence budget jumped 20pc to $9 billion post-conflict. But non-traditional threats and climate-induced disruptions strain resources. Beijing's dual-use vessels, doubling as intelligence gatherers, enhance Pakistan's surveillance, but invite US patrols via Diego Garcia. Islamabad's options are narrowing. To navigate this, Pakistan must diversify its approach.

Pakistan's progress hinges on astute diplomacy to turn its vulnerabilities into assets without alienating powers. As superpowers jostle, Islamabad's agility will determine if it emerges as a pivotal player or a pawn in the waves. In the maritime maelstrom of the Indian Ocean, security is not just about fleets and missiles; it is about outmanoeuvring the tides of rivalry.

Dua Zahra
Chakwal

Ombudsman failure

THE persistent non-implementation of judgments passed by the Karachi Regional Office of the Federal Ombudsman is worrying. Despite clear decisions issued in favour of employees of the Federal Urdu University of Arts, Science and Technology (FUUAST), the university administration has reportedly failed to comply. Repeated reminders to the ombudsman office have produced no meaningful outcome. This state of affairs seriously undermines the purpose of the whole system.

When its judgments are ignored with impunity, government servants are forced to seek relief from higher courts, rendering the ombudsman mechanism ineffective.

There is now a growing perception that ombudsman offices neither have due authority, nor are they treated with the seriousness they deserve. If public funds continue to be spent on institutions whose orders are not enforced, it amounts to a misuse of resources and a failure of administrative accountability. Unless ombudsman's judgments are implemented in letter and in spirit, the institution risks losing both relevance and credibility.

Prof (Dr) Tauseef Ahmed Khan
Karachi

Non-functional portal

WHEN the Prime Minister's Portal was launched in October 2018, it was hailed as a landmark step towards bridging the gap between the citizens and the government. For a country long shackled by corruption, inefficiency and administrative inertia, the idea seemed revolutionary. Ordinary Pakistanis could finally report grievances with a simple photo, video or screenshot, and could expect quick, transparent redressal.

Seven years later, the optimism has faded. Complaints pile up, responses are formulaic, and results are, at best, superficial. The portal's most common closing remark, "Relief has been provided", has become a tragic refrain. In most cases, no one verifies whether any relief was actually delivered. This exposes not just systemic inefficiency, but also a dangerous lack of due accountability that defeats the platform's very purpose.

Adding to the irony, the government continues to pour millions of rupees each month into maintaining the portal — money drawn from the same taxpayers who receive little in return. Despite the heavy expenditure, the portal's impact remains negligible, its performance is dismal, and its credibility is fading fast.

In view of the government's keen interest in privatisation, perhaps the portal should also be considered for such a fate. A system that consumes public funds without delivering public service is a luxury the nation can ill afford. It is time for the government to either reform this digital grievance system or wind it down entirely, and redirect those millions of rupees towards programmes that bring tangible, measurable relief to the people.

Zeshan Shoukat
Multan

A step backward

THE Sindh government recently implemented e-traffic challan in Karachi with much fanfare, but the question is whether we are making progress together, or building a system that targets some while benefiting others. We need digitisation, but even the best of policies can fail if they are implemented without taking into account the capacity of institutions, the lived realities of the citizens, and the wider socioeconomic consequences. The idea of e-challans seems promising, but the way it is being implemented frustrates the public.

For some individuals, the abrupt increase in e-challan fines feels more like an unexpected cost of survival than a push towards discipline. A corporate executive in Clifton might not care about a challan of Rs2,000, but a rider whose daily income is only Rs1,200 would be devastated. Another obstacle is digital literacy. The police force itself needs digital infrastructure, training and open supervision.

Additionally, fairness is at stake. Although minor infractions are frequently captured by cameras, what happens when a pedestrian abruptly crosses the road, a signal malfunctions, or a route is poorly marked? In the absence of concurrent investments in public awareness campaigns and road infrastructure, e-challans may lead to a situation in which people are held responsible for defects that are out of their control.

More significantly, technology does not always increase institutional accountability, even while it may contain corruption at the street level. The cameras are audited by whom? Who makes sure that vehicle data is entered correctly? Who answers appeals from citizens?

Trust-based compliance is more likely to last than fear-based compliance. As such, when citizens feel valued, informed and supported, they cooperate more voluntarily. Regrettably, a lot of people feel taken advantage of by the current system. Karachi needs e-challans, but it also needs empathy in policymaking.

Muhammad Ammar
Karachi

Dark Web awareness

IN an age where almost all personal and institutional data is digitised, understanding the full spectrum of the internet — including its darker alleys — is no longer a niche skill; it is a fundamental requirement. Unfortunately, even among those claiming digital literacy, there is a critical lack of practical awareness regarding the Dark Web and its operational mechanics.

As a law student, I understand that the legal and ethical ramifications of the Dark Web, which often facilitates illicit activities, are vast. Yet, merely warning students about its dangers is seriously insufficient. Universities should treat the Dark Web not as a taboo subject, but as a crucial case study in all relevant courses, especially those related to information technology (IT) and cybersecurity.

We must equip our graduates not just to use technology, but to defend against those who exploit it. This education should include understanding anonymity networks (for example, Tor) by explaining how these networks work, both for legitimate privacy and for criminal anonymity; recognising phishing and data breaches, and also highlighting how stolen credentials (often traded on the Dark Web) lead to cyberattacks; and digital forensics like teaching principles of tracking and combating cybercrime in these spaces.

By integrating this awareness, we can turn a potential threat into a powerful tool for learning and defence. Our focus should shift from blanket prohibitions to informed preparedness. Failure to address this topic openly leaves future professionals vulnerable to sophisticated cyber threats.

Muhammad Ali Ahmed
Rawalpindi

▶ **WASTEWATER ISSUE:** Islamabad is considered an attractive city with paved roads and lush greenery all around. However, the Hostel City area paints an ugly picture. There is a lack of sewerage system, and wastewater stands on the roads and streets. The residents suffer every single day, but there is apparently no mechanism in place to drain the water properly. Sadly, we are unable to learn a lesson from the planners of the Indus Valley Civilisation who amazed others with their dynamic sewerage system. It is imperative for the authorities concerned to drain the accumulated water from the area immediately.
Rehman Shakir
Islamabad

▶ **UNIVERSITY IN THARPARKAR:** Thar is part of Tharparkar district, which is one of the four districts that come under Mirpurkhas division. The entire division does not have a single public-sector university. Every year, students from Tharparkar get top positions in the entrance examinations conducted by different universities. However, a major portion of this talented youth is deprived of higher education because of poverty, financial limitations and lack of a higher education institution or university in Tharparkar district. The government needs to invest in human development, and establish a university in the region.
Ali Nawaz Rahimoo
Umerkot

▶ **DIGITAL DIVIDE:** The Tank district, a remote but vital region of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, continues to lag behind in the national push for digital connectivity. The local residents face chronic network outages, dropped calls, and internet speeds that barely exceed 2G levels. This disparity stifles education, telemedicine and small businesses. The root causes are clear: inadequate tower infrastructure, unreliable power supply and bureaucratic delays in spectrum allocation. Without swift intervention, such as subsidised solar-powered towers and expedited licences, 5G risks becoming another urban privilege, further widening Pakistan's already crippling digital divide.
Mubasher Naseer
Tank

External Ombudsman

Veteran journalist Muhammad Ali Siddiqi is *Dawn's* External Ombudsman (DEO). His duty is to attend to our readers' complaints, and to respond to them professionally. DEO is the investigating authority to whom all complaints can be referred, and it is DEO who takes notice of any alleged violations of *Dawn's* code of ethics, and informs the Editor for appropriate action.
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